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MARTIN CRAGHAN.

BY

GERALDINE BUTT.



*Published under the Direction of the
Committee of General Literature and Education,
appointed by the Society for Promoting
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"Are there giants in the valley;
Giants, leaving footprints yet?
Are there angels in the valley?
Tell me! I forget!"

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MARTIN CRAGHAN.

“AKE care of the lad, Martin! ’tis but a little one.”

Mrs. Craghan sighed as she spoke, looking up into Martin’s face, and then smiled down into little Martin’s bright eyes.

“Never fear, mother,” whispered the boy, “only think of this evening, and the wages—the *first* wages, mother!”

His father looked proudly and tenderly on the eager, happy face, and then across to the hard-worked, toil-worn, pretty woman, who was his wife.

“Never fear, lass,” he said, echoing the hopeful words, “what makes thee down-hearted this morning?”

“He looks so young,” said the woman, plaintively, “and it is such hard, rough work, Martin; all day long I sit and fear for the child.”

“What a foolish little woman,” he said, kissing her. “Good-bye, lass; Martin is half-

way to the shaft by this time ; he is always ready, and to the fore—a venturesome little lad.”

“A brave lad, too,” he muttered, proudly, with his eye on the boy’s slender figure, as he stood waiting impatiently, on the brink of the shaft, for the re-appearing of the cage.

It was the younger Martin’s first week of work in the mines, and this was the day for his first wages. He was a very little chap, even for his ten years, with his mother’s pretty, sleepy eyes, and brown, rippling hair, and being so little, and new to the work, the task allotted to him was that of helping to fill the trucks with coal, as they lay waiting on the iron rails, and start them down the steep incline that led to the foot of the shaft.

There was no great difficulty in the work itself, but it was the loneliness the child minded. The other boy, who had laboured with him all the morning, had been told off, at twelve o’clock, to help the men at work almost a quarter of a mile beyond, and, saving the occasional faint echo of a song, or the far-distant tap of the pickaxes, the silence was dense and undisturbed.

He was a brave little chap, in the main, but he grew almost frightened at last, as the afternoon wore on, and a horrible thought that he had been forgotten, made him catch

his breath, and turn white and sick with fear. He thought at first, in his foolish terror, that he would leave the trucks for ten minutes—ten minutes would bring him to the shaft—and see if his father were still there; but suddenly, the idea vanished—what! leave his work now, when the time must be nearly up, and the wages due? “No, I am not quite a coward,” the boy said, laughing out loud as he spoke, to convince himself of the truth of his words, and he caught up the dim echo of the song, and chanted it monotonously. It was a Methodist hymn—a paraphrase—and two lines ran thus:—

“His Angels He shall give in charge—”
“And they shall bear thee up.”

He meant to encourage himself, and forget the momentary fear, but, somehow, his voice sounded so odd and doleful, and the little tallow dip in the front of his cap gave such a fitful light, that he grew frightened again, and paused—listening to what?

To a strange, rumbling noise, that seemed to come in an instant, and swallow up all his lesser troubles in one great fear.

Little blocks of coals came crumbling from the walls on to the ground at his feet, and then, without any warning, the distant rumbling sound broke out again, and with it

came the low, moaning cry, of some creature in distress.

There was a trampling of heavy feet, a confused hubbub of voices, and, in a minute, Martin was in the stream of eager, jostling men, who strode, in silent, terrible anxiety, towards the shaft. Thank God! whatever had happened in the pit, that was clear still, and in working order.

Martin might have been among the first of that dense, awe-struck crowd, but that, at the frightened cry, he had turned breathlessly back, to where he had left the laden trucks.

Something that he kissed, with tears in his pretty eyes, came and rubbed a cold nose against his hand, and would not leave him. With resolute, childish hands he put aside his petted mule; with unsteady fingers he dragged the little, tallow dip from the front of his cap, and stuck it on a ledge of coal.

"Good-bye, *dear* Brighteyes," he said, "I have put my little candle so that you need not be afraid of the dark, but you must wait for me here. 'His angels He shall give in charge,' Brighteyes," he said, "over you and me."

As he ran down the long, dark tunnel, the light at the farther end kept him in the right path, and hushed, expectant voices told him that he was safe still—the shaft was clear.

What was it that made him pause and hesitate again, on the very threshold of safety? What made a sudden smile break through the pallor of his face, as he stood and listened? Only that out of the far, dim distance, that he was leaving behind him, with swift steps, there came the faint echo of a song.

Before him, a little circle of light shone out, like Hope through the gathering gloom. Behind, the darkness fell, like a pall, between him and those distant voices.

With no thought of his own imperilled safety; with only one cry for his father—that his father never heard—he turned back, “There is more than an inch of water,” he heard some one cry out, suddenly, behind him; but he did not stop to think what the words meant. He plodded up the long, deserted tunnel, groping his way through the blinding darkness, with no thought save that of warning those unconscious men of their danger—for nearly ten minutes, staggering, faltering, struggling, over all obstacles to his unshod feet. Then, suddenly, he spread out his hands before him, with a cry that echoed and re-echoed down the lonely path—he had lost his way!

Nearly wild with terror and dismay, he tried to struggle back to the dim rays of light at the entrance—but in vain. Dark-

ness, that seized upon him, and wrapped him in, met him at every turn, and there were no voices to guide him now.

He had grown stupid at last, in his despair, when, before him, through the darkness, there rose up suddenly, the dim, uncertain flicker of his little candle.

All his courage came back at the light, and he clapped his hands. "I have come back, Brighteyes," he said; but there was no sound in answer. Brighteyes, more faithless than his child-master, had wandered away in the darkness—he had not been content to wait.

"Then I must go alone," the boy said; and he took up the tallow dip, and picked his way, with tired feet, over the rough, uneven ground. Where could they be? he wondered—those men who had been at work beyond! what if all these weary steps had been in vain! what if they were safe!

The candle flickered, and went out. He put up his hand to grope his way, and called. His hand struck against a rough, uneven wall, that shut him in again, and barred his progress. He was too far gone for cries or complaints now, but he knelt down in utter silence, and felt up and down the slight partition. It had not been there an hour ago, he knew—what was it?

His heart beat very fast, as, with his little hands, he traced the shape of bricks, and saw that, in some fear or peril, the men beyond had built up this mockery of a barricade between him and themselves.

What could be the reason? If they knew of the danger, why had they not escaped? Why had they walled themselves into this living tomb, if there were any other chance of life left? He beat his hands against the walls, and cried out, passionately, "Take me in; take me in;" but no one heard him, and his voice died away in a sob. He staggered to his feet, and stumbled forward, to the place where he had worked all day, falling, with both hands outstretched, over a mass of coal.

Dragging himself up, his hand splashed down into a little tide of water at his feet, and, through the darkness, the ripple and murmur of tiny waves broke the stillness.

There were no tears in his eyes now, but a despair, too terrible for words, as he gathered himself slowly up, and climbed on to a higher ledge of ground. In all his agony and terror he had never thought of this—never dreamed, for a moment, of this one awful thing—this death, that through the darkness, and the stillness, had laid a detaining hand upon him, and was creeping to his feet—had chosen him out, before them all, as its only prey.

"Oh! mother, mother," sobbed the child,
"I never said 'Good-bye.'"

Exhaustion came presently, and, with exhaustion, fear slumbered. He groped about until he found the end of candle, and struck a match, that was in his pocket, to make a little gleam of light. Something, attracted by the light, came, splashing and slipping, through the rising water—something that stumbled penitently to little Martin's side, and moaned plaintively—something around whose shaggy neck he put his arm, and was comforted.

"I knew you would come back some time," he sobbed, "but I'm not going to think yet, Brighteyes—not just yet, for I've got such a long, long time to die in, and the water isn't over my foot yet. I think we'll write out about the angels, Brighteyes, on the slate—you and me, with this little bit of chalk; maybe it'll do us good."

He knelt on one knee, and traced the ill-formed letters on the slate:—"He shall give His angels charge"—"His angels, Brighteyes—that'll be us soon—you and me. I don't remember any more"—he broke off, suddenly, "but, maybe, God knows the rest."

There was a thundering rush and roar that drowned his voice, and drowned the sweetness of his laugh; a crash—a fall—a

terror of great darkness, out of which there came the sound of a frightened cry. Then all was silent.

With his last conscious effort Martin stretched out his arm to touch something that lay across him, and gasped under his breath, "Never mind, Brighteyes," he said, "you're not alone." He felt the water rippling round his bare feet; he felt the agony of pain, that brought a moan to his white lips; he felt the descending darkness, that led him to the very threshold of Death; but through the fear, and pain, and darkness, even to the shore of Death itself, truly God gave His angels charge concerning the child.

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All night long, with the stars bright above them, the water rising hour by hour, a band of brave men worked in steady silence, more eloquent than words, to force their way through the great blocks of coal, to where six living souls waited, with white faces, to see which should win the day—those anxious workers, or the rising waters.

They never once paused in their eager task, save when a woman, who had come down with them, and who stood, straining her haggard eyes through the darkness, suddenly stumbled, and fell fainting. Then one of the

men—it was her husband—put his pick aside, and lifted her into the cage. “Poor little mother,” he said, “go home and wait;” and then he set to work again. Kind hands brought back the life to her eyes, and laid her down to wait at the mouth of the pit; but she would not go home.

So it went on for four hours more; then, from the foremost man, a shout came back. Martin Craghan leant on his pick, and listened. “What have you found, lads?” he shouted back, hoarsely.

The answer woke the echoes of the passage, and woke, also, a dead hope in Martin’s heart.

“A child.”

“Alive?”

“Yes.”

The glad answer went peeling all along the dark tunnels of coal, and was carried up by rough, kind voices, into the grey, summer dawn. A pretty, care-worn woman, kneeling at the pit’s mouth, leant her face over the shaft, and spoke under her breath—peering down, as if even her loving eyes could pierce the darkness: “Thank God,” she said, “for my little, living child.”

So they found him—encaged in the prison that had so much the semblance of a tomb; and they paused, and turned, wonderstruck, to one another, when, out of the ruin and confusion

—from the very midst of great blocks of coal, they saw the unmarred, living face, smile up. “It is a miracle,” Martin said, standing to look. But, between the frail limbs and the blocks of coal, they struck against some soft, protecting substance, that it was too dark to see, that had interposed a shield between the child and death—a torn, mangled body, on which the great blocks of coal had fallen and rested, crushing all the life out of the patient limbs.

Little Martin, opening his eyes, when the light of the candles fell upon him, put out his hand to touch the shaggy coat. “Why, Brighteyes, it is quite light,” he said, “do you think it is the angels?”

Then he caught sight of the rough faces peering curiously at him, and the rough, eager hands working for his release. His father, with his cap off, and something dimming his eyes, was kneeling by his side, and reading the words on the piece of slate, that stood at the boy’s head, so strangely like a monument.

“God bless the lad,” he said, in a choking voice; and then he added, in a softer tone, “Thank God.”

Little Martin looked up,—“I didn’t get the wages, after all, father,” he said, anxiously; what hurt my leg? where’s mother?”

They tenderly dressed and bandaged the

little leg, that had been so sorely hurt by its imprisonment, and told him how the love and life of his dumb friend had been his shield; and, in their rough way, they were very pitiful over the mangled body, and laid it aside from the ruin, in the far corner, with a piece of coarse sacking over it.

"I can't quite understand, father," Martin said, gravely, as he stood, softly stroking the shaggy coat—"He shall give His angels charge—you know, that was over Brighteyes and me; and yet he is all hurt, and dead, and I am only a little hurt, and quite alive."

"I don't quite see, neither," said his father, thoughtfully, "and yet, Martin, think of the mother at home, and how it might have gone with us, if——"

Meanwhile, the little mother, at the pit's mouth, was waiting—waiting, in the patience of her hope—for the child, over whom the angels had kept such careful watch.

